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The Line Between Methodology and Praxis

Andrea C. Fields

I would like to begin by disclosing that the overall purpose I have ventured to extend in the writing of my report has been to address the question: How do we, as researchers, as scholars, as students, as teachers, and perhaps also then feasibly as activists, effectively bridge the gap between theory, methodology, and praxis? This report contains both epistemological and methodological discussions, examining potential strengths and problematic uses of oral history as an alternative to traditional empirical social science research.

I. A German-Jewish intellectual with Marxist leanings who lived in exile while fleeing Nazi-Germany at the dawn of the second world war, and who is now associated with the Frankfurt school of social theory.

In *Experience and Poverty*, Walter Benjamin¹ describes the traumatic shocks that people experienced during the First World War as “some of the most monstrous events in the history of the world.” Yet, he argues, many people returned in silence, “not richer but poorer in communicable experience,” and that this went by seemingly unnoticed (1999, p. 734). New technology and an overwhelming wealth of ideas provided ample opportunity for entertainment, commodity consumption, and information to occupy time and space, yet the overwhelming result was an increased alienation. During his reflections in *The Storyteller* Benjamin explains:

Every morning brings us the news of the globe, and yet we are poor in noteworthy stories. This is because no event any longer comes to us without already being shot through with explanation. In other words, by now almost nothing that happens benefits storytelling; almost everything benefits information. Actually, it is half the art of storytelling to keep a story free from explanation as one reproduces it... The most extraordinary things, marvelous things, are related with the greatest accuracy, but the psychological connection of the events is not forced on the reader. It is left up to him to interpret things the way he understands them, and thus the narrative achieves an amplitude that information lacks. (1968, p. 89)

Benjamin compares the transformation of epic forms of storytelling to the rhythms that have brought change to the earth’s surface over the course of thousands of centuries. “Hardly any other forms of human communication have taken shape more slowly, been lost so slowly” he reflects (1968, p. 88).



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Although the storytelling traditions described by Walter Benjamin might be argued outside of the current cultural and political paradigms through which many of us consider ourselves identified, his writings about the storyteller and experience provide us with an invaluable glimpse into the connection between historical consciousness and inter-personal narrative. With our current North American globalized paradigms of political, economic, environmental, social, and cultural infrastructures, we are now more than ever living in an age that is steeped with information, but how does this speak of our ability to share the daily experience of our lives with one another? Why might it be of considerable importance to distinguish the value between information as it is opposed to experience in the construction of the narratives that guide our understandings of our daily agency and inter-subjective identities?

While being one of Paulo Freire's most widely known documents that proposes a revolutionary theory for critical pedagogy, the book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* acts as a call to action for all members of societies, communities, and groups with inequality in their social and political systems to merge reflection with praxis. Freire (1970) directs this call to those who are in positions of leadership, alongside those that suffer under the weight of oppression, to embark upon the ongoing process of building deeper interpersonal understanding with conscious recognition of the internalized identities and ongoing psychosocial consequences faced by societies where oppression and exploitation continue to exist.

Freire's argument is that in order to critically intervene against the false realities that socially condition and repeat dialectical relationships of uneven power and oppression among people, we must better understand the inter-subjective agency that we each share in constructing those realities. Although this shift toward greater social reflexivity is integral, Freire strongly cautions that it is not enough to simply remain cognizant of the dialectical positions of power in which the mutual dependencies between oppressor and the oppressed are encumbered.² He asserts that the next step must necessarily amount to an ongoing inclusive praxis that works in solidarity alongside the self-directed measures of those who have been oppressed to create newly inter-subjective spaces for liberated agency. Aside from Freire's existential, psychoanalytic, structuralist, and spiritual influences, one of the integral components to the process of re-humanization contained in his work is highly Marxian. While Freire refers to a process that acts against the alienated objectification of others perpetuated by dialectical divisions of power that is central for a return to the human subjectivity of all people, he also draws upon the early Marxian proposition that a division between creation and a larger social connectivity petrifies the fundamental life process into a static object that has been hollowed from meaning. This state of petrified existence amounts to the equivalent of a social death on both sides of the coin, with

2. As once suggested by Tommie Shelby (2003), this might potentially lead to the division of a progressive idealism from actually engaging in concrete forms of action that are directed toward changing the material conditions of inequality that Karl Marx had criticized in the liberatory strategy of the young Hegelians.

neither the oppressor nor the oppressed able to escape the “reality” of a codependent state of violence.

Freire (1970) explains that this problem can be exemplarily observed through the manifest conditions of the traditional “banking” methods found in education, while arguing: “Education is suffering from narration sickness” (p.71). As explained by Freire, the “banking” method is based on a dialectical relationship between a narrating Subject (the teacher) and the patiently absorbing objects (the students). The teacher will narrate the contents of a “deposit” that the students must mechanically absorb as “containers” to be filled, with no added encouragement to think creatively, to form critical inquiry, or to transcend the passive and obedient role that has been imposed upon them. The contents that the students receive “whether values or empirical dimensions of reality, tend in the process of being narrated to become lifeless and petrified,” states Freire, while the teacher describes reality as if it were “motionless, static, compartmentalized, and predictable” and completely alien to the existential experience of the students (p. 71). In other words, the teacher-as-narrator leads the students to value the pure essence of the thing over lived experience, with no room for added meaning or subjectivity. Words are then “emptied of their concreteness” to become “a hollow, alienated, and alienating verbosity” (p. 71). Or perhaps in this case we might also elaborate to say that words remain alienated from their human context as creative communication, while remaining abstracted items for others to mechanically absorb as information.

Freire describes the banking concept of education as a severely misguided system at best, while tracing larger ideological implications back to the issues evident from the ongoing patterns of marginalization that occur in oppressive societies. Freire challenges the myth that those who are marginalized have somehow wound up living (by some fault of their own) on the *outside of* society, arguing instead that oppressed and marginalized peoples have always been living on the inside *for* society. The banking approach serves to perpetuate complacency by keeping the oppressed believing that there is a dichotomy between human beings and the world, that, “a person is merely *in* the world, not *with* the world or *with* others; the individual is spectator, not re-creator. In this view, the person is not a conscious being,” nor do they feel empowered to act (Freire, 1970, p. 75).

The next question that stands to be addressed on the Freirian scale is the following: How do societies, communities, and groups build a body of knowledge that simultaneously educates and encourages the dissolution of Subject/object power divisions in actual praxis? How can historical consciousness be integrated into an ongoing pedagogical process that allows for an inclusive re-humanization from the existential position of those who have

been objectified as marginalized others? “The solution is not to integrate them into the structure of oppression, but to transform that structure so that they can become beings for themselves” (p. 74), asserts Freire. He proposes that communities strive instead to restructure the system through a participatory problem-posing model for education that is committed to liberation through ongoing dialogical communication. Freire (1970) explains:

Liberation is a praxis: the action and reflection of men and women upon their world in order to transform it... Those truly committed to liberation must reject the banking concept in its entirety, adopting instead a concept of women and men as conscious beings, and consciousness as consciousness intent upon the world. ... “Problem posing” education, responding to the essence of consciousness—*intentionality*—rejects communiqués and embodies communication. It epitomizes the special characteristic of consciousness: being *conscious of*, not only as intent on objects but as turned in upon itself in a Jasperian “split”—consciousness as consciousness *of* consciousness. (p. 79)

The praxis of teaching and learning then become a collective experience that is based on mutual growth through dialogical cognition. Teachers become students, and students become teachers, as most importantly all are life learners. In this case, Freire argues that the banking concept of knowledge based on authority loses its validity, as the educative process is no longer based on the vertical patterns of subservience and authority. Through facing the “problems relating to themselves in the world and with the world” as they feel “increasingly challenged and obliged to respond to that challenge” (Freire, 1970, p. 81), students and teachers alike are instead challenged by an educative process that strives for a newly formed critical intervention with reality.

One of the most invaluable aspects about the use of oral history as a research method is that it is typically based on the words and subjective memories from the lived experiences of everyday people that might have otherwise been lost or unknown. As opposed to positivist- and enlightenment-based paradigms that have positioned the natural world and human subject under the same linear historical models and laws used to determine that which can be verified through scientific reason and methodology, the use of oral history research can potentially facilitate what may be considered more organic models for understanding that encourage the space for inter-subjectivity often discounted in the dominant historical narratives that rely on the prestige of (so-called) factual information (Christians, 2005; Bertaux, 1981). Perhaps in light of this context, memory research through the personal accounts of everyday people can be considered an invaluable heuristic device used for describing historical changes and events that not only documents the individual experiences of those recounting their stories, but also provides a special means to gain insight toward the historical consciousness of groups

and societies within particular eras. As it has been aptly stated by Tamara Giles-Vernick (2006), oral histories can prove to be a very useful resource for researchers to discover “how participants in these past events and processes understood themselves, how these events and processes unfolded, and why certain people chose (or refused) to participate in them” (p. 86). Giles-Vernick (2006) argues furthermore that even of those scholars who have been actively critical of oral historians’ focus on the potentially elite voices of those who are considered the main purveyors and guardians of stories in societies that rely on strong oral traditions, several others will alternatively argue that the continued collection and analysis of these kinds of sources can also provide “valuable glimpses into the making of elite power” (p. 87).

For the remainder of my report, I elect to focus specifically on an in-depth exploration of the strengths and critical concerns surrounding feminist oral history research methodology and praxis. My rationale for this choice is as follows: One of the primary reasons that many feminist activists and scholars have chosen to conduct oral history research is to lend greater agency to the voices of women as historically oppressed and marginalized people. Those traditional oral history methodologies more predominantly used in the fields of sociology and anthropology have been strongly criticized by feminists as problematic in the collection and use of women’s words. This has in turn opened the floor to a variety of interpretations for what constitutes the creation of a feminist oral history that works in ethical and self-reflexive praxis to reassert the power of silenced voices. It is therefore arguably worth consideration that further exploration of the specific issues addressed in critiques formed for case studies that involve feminist oral history research might serve as a useful trajectory toward an informed self-reflexivity that calls into question important areas for other specialized fields engaged in oral history research methodology and praxis, particularly in light of any research focusing on the experiences of oppressed and marginalized peoples. The themes principally highlighted by feminist researchers and scholars Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai (1991) in the book *Women’s Words* are elaborated upon in my full report through drawing examples from other scholarly feminist research articles, in addition to the issues and debates that are posed in the chapter on feminist oral history research from the book *Feminist Methods in Social Research* by scholar Shulamit Reinharz (1992). For the purpose of this condensed version of my research I will not be able to present an in-depth methodological exploration of each problematic, however, in my complete report I have compiled these critiques into the following three areas for discussion: *subjectivity and voice, the control of representation, relationships of power and the politics of identity*.

In the introductory chapter to the book *Women’s Words*, Sherna Berger Gluck and Daphne Patai (1991) are not hesitant to describe some earlier

attempts at feminist oral history research as problematic, having often been based on the partial “assumptions that gender united women more powerfully than race and class divided them, and the mere study of women fulfilled a commitment to do research ‘about’ women” (p. 2). Gluck and Patai explain that as feminist scholars have begun to further critically study different moments and discourses in the production of women’s oral history, the importance of existing separations between narrator and interpreter has become increasingly apparent. This growing recognition of the “distinct imbalances in power and privilege” present in a good number of women’s oral history projects has lead feminist researchers to more counteractive and self-reflexive means of conducting research (p. 3). The varying degrees of accountability and self-reflexivity for the researcher to consider when transmitting the messages recounted by voices from relatively powerless and marginalized groups in societies are similarly explored in Shulamit Reinharz’s discussion. In keeping with the important questions posed by the feminist scholar Julia Swindells, Reinharz (1992) describes one of the main ethical concerns as follows: “who is speaking when women speak for themselves?” while further adding that Swindells’ skepticism “about the ‘authenticity’ of voices hinges on the fact that their very production may be a form of oppression” (p. 138). Reinharz explains that the identity, presence, and significance of voice for the interview subject, alongside the importance of active listening, and the possible relative shared positioning for the researcher all come into play in the different questions surrounding the interpretation and praxis of building feminist oral histories: “Thus, feminist oral historians disagree about what kind of voice and whose voice is present in a published oral history—is it the voice of oppression, the voice of imitation, the authentic unsilenced self, or multiple voices?” (p. 139).

Gluck and Patai (1991) articulate how numerous feminist activists and scholars have grappled with similar questions surrounding “the tension that ensues” when confronted with the “incongruity of trying to do ethical research in an all too imperfect world” (p. 157). Some feminist scholars have responded by devising their own alternative research methodologies as a means to bridge the divides between “researcher” and “researched” through further engaging with participatory action research models that find their roots in community activism. In congruence with the rationale behind Freire’s participatory problem-posing model for education, Gluck and Patai suggest that perhaps the better solution is to modify the underlying *structure* that determines the conditions for the project itself, rather than striving to remain independently reflexive as researchers while continuing at odds with attempts to integrate people into projects that replicate oppressive power divisions. As it is proposed through the epistemological underpinnings of this report, just because a research project aims to empower those who have been oppressed in theory does not mean that it will necessarily succeed if a combi-

nation of inter-subjective reflexivity and social action has not been integrated into its actual praxis. Much like technologically deterministic theories have mistakenly attributed a disproportionate amount of power to technology as the agent for social and political change, it is not just the tools used that determine whether a project is change-oriented or not, but more importantly the human interactions that take place *through* them that will determine the structural significance of this change. To quote Rina Benmayor: “As researchers with a commitment to social change, we must decenter ourselves from the ‘ivory tower’ and construct more participatory, democratic practices. We must keep people and politics at the center of our research” (as cited in Gluck and Patai, 1991, p. 173).

As accompaniment to my oral presentation at the 2009 Nelson conference, I circulated a copy of the book *Hope in Shadows*, by Brad Cran and Gillian Jerome, released in 2008 as part of Pivot Legal Aid Society’s *Hope in Shadows* project. This book contains oral history accounts and photographs by and of the residents of Vancouver’s Downtown Eastside. By integrating the book *Hope in Shadows* into my report it has been my intention to provide a current example of a political project outside of academia that I suggest strives for community empowerment through the combined use of oral history methodology with properties of participatory action research. In choosing to do so, I do not aim to propose that this one project pose as an ideal case for others to emulate, but hope instead that it might encourage those reading this report to consider some of the complexities and potentially problematic inter-subjective relations of power encountered in the praxis of developing research for similar forms of projects.

Author

Andrea C. Fields is a Masters student in Communication at Simon Fraser University, where she currently studies Walter Benjamin and the city through critical social theory with analysis based in feminisms. Andrea is additionally pursuing studies at Simon Fraser University in the areas of applied project management and sustainable community development, with a longer-term interest in participatory action based research projects. She has worked as a volunteer in Vancouver’s downtown eastside in addition to acting as grassroots coordinator for projects that aim to generate awareness and strengthen community ties through art and culture.

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